

## **FROM CZECHOSLOVAKIA TO AFRICA**

Czech Native joins the Peace Corps and starts a non-profit

By Pavla Zakova-Laney

I was born and grew up in Czechoslovakia, where, after graduation from high school I worked at a ballroom dancing school for fifteen years, organizing ballroom dance classes for high school students. I did competitive ballroom dancing for fifteen years because I absolutely loved it. I never desired to leave Czechoslovakia but nevertheless I moved to the United States in 1986. I learned English language. I went back to school because I felt it would help me to preserve our beautiful planet. I started at Middlesex Community College in Bedford, Massachusetts and then transferred to Wellesley College as a Davis Scholar. I graduated in 1995, majoring in ecology and conservation biology. After becoming an American citizen in July 1994 I applied to the Peace Corps. In December 1995 I received an invitation to serve as a math/science teacher in Cameroon. I never thought I could teach since I was extremely shy and could not speak in front of two people, never mind a whole classroom. However, I decided to overcome these limitations which resulted in an amazing life changing experience.

### **A Paradise Called Tatum**

My Peace Corps journey began in June 1996 in the West Africa country of Cameroon. After three months of training I was sent to Tatum, a small village which lies on the Ring Road in the Northwest Region. It is characterized by majestic mountains, rugged hills, pastures, valleys, many waterfalls and farms.

Tatum is approximately 6,500 feet above sea level, and therefore the weather is pleasant and rather cool with few mosquitoes. The landscape is peaceful and beautiful. I arrived there on September 2, 1996, and by the end of the month I knew I wanted to stay longer than the two year assignment. It seemed to be heaven on earth. I spent most of my time preparing for my classes and organizing two clubs, The Joy and Success Club and the Dance Club.

The Joy and Success Club was a spiritual club. Our goal was to change negative thinking into positive by sharing spiritual "food." For the Dance Club, I taught the cha-cha, samba and waltz. We learned some traditional dances as well and performed all dances during occasions such as graduation and Youth Day Holiday. The remaining time I spent teaching and working on various school and community projects. During my three years in Tatum, I taught six secondary biology classes and instructed a total of 300 students.

I was chosen as a class mistress for one of the classes and I stayed with them for three years. I loved all the students very much. They respected their teachers, were eager to learn and were so grateful for everything.

### **Eye-Opening Excursions**

There was no science laboratory in my school so I took students on many excursions. We went to the neighboring village of Ndu to tour the tea plantations and the tea factory. Then we visited the Teachers Training College in Tatum, which had its own

farm with farm animals, honey bees, carpentry and metal shops, laboratories and a library. Composted animal and human waste generated methane gas, which fueled the college's cooking stoves. Most of the students had never seen a lake, so we organized trips to beautiful Lake Oku near Mount Oku. Several times we traveled to Bamendjing Reservoir which is in a beautiful and hot valley. They learned a lot there, and for some of the students it was their first boat ride. For our final trip, a friend and I organized a visit to Limbe, where the students were able to admire the Atlantic Ocean, visit a wildlife center, botanical garden, oil refinery and the large seaport, Douala. For most of the students it was once-in-a-lifetime experience. The 4,000-meter Mount Cameroon was erupting at that time which made our trip even more exciting.

### **Wedding Day in Tatum**

On July 21, 1998, I was married in Tatum to Jess L. Laney, an American who had served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Gambia in 1990-92. We met in Oregon during my biology internship in the summer of 1995.

We were married in an unfinished Presbyterian Church building. The two pastors did not have an opportunity to rehearse the pronunciation of our names, which were foreign to them so they came up with a different version each time they spoke them. It was hilarious. After the ceremony, we walked to the local Catholic Church for our wedding reception. I remained in Tatum for another year and then joined my husband in Oregon.

### **A Great Need for Supplies**

Soon after I came to Tatum, I assessed the Government Secondary School as to what the needs were. The first priority was to complete the four unfinished classrooms. When I came to Tatum, the school had 14 classrooms. Ten were usable and only three of them had ceilings. The first successful project was the completion of two classrooms.

The second successful project was to construct ceilings in six classrooms which greatly improved learning conditions in the school. Before the installment of the ceilings the sound from the rain on the tin roof was so loud that the only way to communicate was by writing on the board. My last project involved getting about 600 textbooks and some National Geographic magazines, mostly through the Peace Corps Gifts-In-Kind Program. Today, the school library has over 2,600 volumes of textbooks, books and periodicals. Most students came from families of small farmers who struggled to pay for school uniforms and school fees. A great majority did not have the necessary textbooks and basic school supplies. I gave the students pens, pencils, notebooks and a few textbooks but the need was much greater than I could supply.

Two-thirds of all students came from various villages, too far to walk every day. They had to rent places, which usually consisted of bare bricks with no electricity, water, beds, table or chairs. They often ran out of food and money for kerosene. They did not have blankets or warm clothing. Despite these terrible conditions, quite a few students did well academically. Many of these conditions still exist today.

## **Unimaginable Joy**

My service as a Peace Corps volunteer ended in July 1999, but I stayed a few weeks longer because I did not want to leave my beloved students. I decided to visit students every day until the day before I was to leave. These visits changed the rest of my stay in Cameroon from sadness to unimaginable joy. The family of each student we visited was so happy and grateful for a teacher visiting their child in their home and it made me very happy, too. Except for one visit, we walked everywhere which was great exercise after many hours of sitting. The longest trip was about 80 kilometers. It was hard on the feet, but well worth the pain. The five students we visited were so happy and proud to have us meet their families.

## **Educare-Africa**

After returning to the U.S., I began a campaign to raise funds and donations of school and related supplies for students in Cameroon. Inspired by my Peace Corps experience I founded Educare-Africa in September 2000 and together with Cameroon-based coordinators of Educare-Africa we continue to deliver donated funds and supplies each year.

In May 2000, I used my Peace Corps money to travel to Cameroon to deliver 18 packages of donated clothing and school supplies to the school in Tatum. I visited 150 students in 17 villages, encouraging them to continue their studies.

In May 2001, I returned to Cameroon with 17 packages of donations mostly of school supplies and clothing. The 80 best students received prizes prepared from the donations of school supplies, 117 students benefited from donations of clothing, 80 students received financial assistance and additional 355 textbooks were purchased for the school. For the first time three Cameroonian teachers joined us in visiting about 240 students in 18 villages, all by foot.

Since then, I have traveled to Cameroon annually in May for seven weeks to personally assist the students. Every year since 2004 Educare-Africa has assisted about 500 students in Cameroon with school fees, exam registration fees and other essential school needs.

I now live in Albany, Oregon with my husband, four cats and a dog, where I continue to devote myself to helping the students of Cameroon, promote animal welfare and preserve our beautiful planet often through photography.

Educare-Africa is a non-profit, charitable 501(c) (3) organization.

**Goals:** To improve living and learning conditions for the students and teachers in Cameroon today so that the students can successfully complete their education and then can help their country. In addition, to promote peace, cross-cultural understanding, love and unity of all people.

For more information go to our new Educare-Africa blog.

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